

## Tackling Hate Speech

# Yet Another Wake-Up Call From The President

Observers say this latest alert from the Head of State in his end-of-year speech signals the urgency with which hate speech and disinformation should be tackled in the country

**Macdonald AYANG**

**F**ollowing the address to the nation by the President of the Republic last Friday, a number of key themes he raised have continued to animate discussion in some circles. One of such issues is the ever persistent hate speech and disinformation in the country.

Once again, the President of the Republic made a clarion call, saying such practices do not only tarnish the image of

the country but sow seeds of disunity and discord among various sociological groups. "Lately, we have witnessed an upsurge in unpatriotic behaviour, the proliferation of hate speech and the posting of violent, obscene and shameful videotapes which have shocked the nation's collective conscience," the Head of State lamented.

He went on: "The persistent publication of 'fake news' in the mainstream or social media has contributed towards sustaining falsehood, thus preventing many of our fellow citizens from getting the right information on key issues."

Then came this fervent appeal: "Therefore, I appeal to your sense of individual responsibility and urge each of you to promote the culture of peace. I call on the government to step up efforts to raise awareness on the responsible use of the social media by all social classes. We must remain patriotic, united and supportive people. We must cherish peace and seek harmony at all times."

These words of caution, observers say, are a timely alert from the President given the experience many Cameroonians have lived lately. Never a day goes by without one

reading a hate remark in this social media group or the other. Neither does a day ever pass by without some entirely fake information making rounds on the blogosphere.

Some of these messages not only potent serious threat to national peace and concord, but also sometimes violate the integrality and dignity of individuals.

That is why, like the Head of State said, there is need for deep introspection on the kind of things fellow Cameroonians say to one another, in order that we can truly live in a peaceful and harmonious

society void of vile and vitriolic vituperations. Surely, this is crucial and pertinent. That is why the President decided early in 2021, to assign a special mandate on the fight against hate speech and xenophobia to the National Commission for the Promotion of Bilingualism and Multiculturalism. Within this mandate the Commission, headed by erstwhile Prime Minister Peter Mafany Musonge, made several trips to the regions and held working sessions with multi-sector stakeholders on the depth of the problem of hate speech and how it can be better tackled.

## "Policymakers, Politicians Must Join Fight Against Hate Speech"

*Desmond Ngala, Anti-hate speech campaigner*

The Head of State, in his end-of-year address, talked about the proliferation of hate speech. As the Cameroon Country Manager of Defy Hate Now - a civil society organisation involved in the fight against this vice, what is your appraisal of this call?

The first thing I will say is that this is another wake-up call on Cameroonians that hate speech, misinformation and disinformation is tearing Cameroon apart. For the number one statesman to rise up and say this has to stop, is a comforting thing for us at Defy Hate Now. We work to mitigate incitement to violence, hate speech, misinformation and disinformation. We need to move from this stage where the President sees this as a problem and challenge to Cameroon's security and development, to a point where we can also harmoniously live together. Hate speech is not new in Cameroon, but for the President to have mentioned it this year in his speech means that there is a new variable which he is seeing, and that variable has been the social media. The social media because in the 1980s or 1990s, we had hate speech which was very rife mainly on political and economic lines. Today, we are seeing hate speech in more varied forms. With the advent of citizen journalism, everyone has a thing to say. So, this



makes it much more cumbersome. It's a good thing that we are fighting the vice, and we hope that many more actors will join the train.

**As a field campaigner against hate speech, how serious would you say the problem is in Cameroon?** As the years go by, hate speech has become more and more subtle. With the advent of the social media, and with many people becoming more intelligent on what they want to say, there are two trends of hate speech which we are seeing. In the first trend, we find people who insult, denigrate and dehumanise others based on their ethnicity, language, body and background generally. There are people who do this and it is unfortunate

that some of them are people who are well placed in society, either within politics or the administration. Some of them actually do it within the mainstream media without anybody actually standing up to raise a finger. The second trend is that of a common man, who at times doesn't know that this is hateful, either produces and shares such content. Here, we have hate speech wavers - people who just take the message and share from one platform to the other -, and those who actually generate hate information with the intention to harm. You find here the link between hate speech and fake news. These two trends are disturbing because we have on the one side, people who are well orga-

nised and know what they are doing; and on the other side, we have people who are seemingly not very well organised, but who take this information and share to the public and this comes with disastrous consequences.

**What has your organisation been doing to check the phenomenon in Cameroon, and what more do you think can be done either by government or civil society?**

The first thing we have been doing is to raise awareness on the dangers of hate speech and trying to mitigate its prevalence. One thing is sure that we cannot stamp out hate speech completely, but our mandate here is to reduce the vice to acceptable levels. We started our work by engaging the media in raising awareness on the dangers of hate speech in the media. This is because the media, which is the channel through which information is communicated, can work to check that. For the online or digital media, we are working with them through a programme dubbed 'Africa Fack-checking Fellowship' on verifying information that is shared out there and also wiping out some hate clichés. We also encourage them to think before they share, and not to just forward messages as received. For the mainstream media, we have the 'Media for Peace' programme that we run where we get journalists from different media

outlets to come together and look for solutions which they can actively contribute. Also, we don't think laws are enough to fight hate speech. The laws are good, but we also need to look for other means and methods such as getting people much more involved and getting people know the dangers of hate speech at community level. There is also the need to engage youth and community leaders, such as chiefs, imams, ardos, sultans, lamidos, and all those who hold positions in society where people look up to them. Artists such as musicians and painters are some of the people we are looking at as well. Very importantly, we are expecting to engage social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp which are popular in Cameroon, to try to cause them revise their community standards that sanction people who propagate hate speech online as often as possible. Like I said earlier, the nature of hate speech is changing by the day. Today, you have something that is not hateful, and tomorrow, it becomes hateful based on the context. The other thing we think should be done is to get policy makers and politicians to come onboard not just to come and make speeches, but to come on board and say 'this has to stop'.

*Interviewed by MA*